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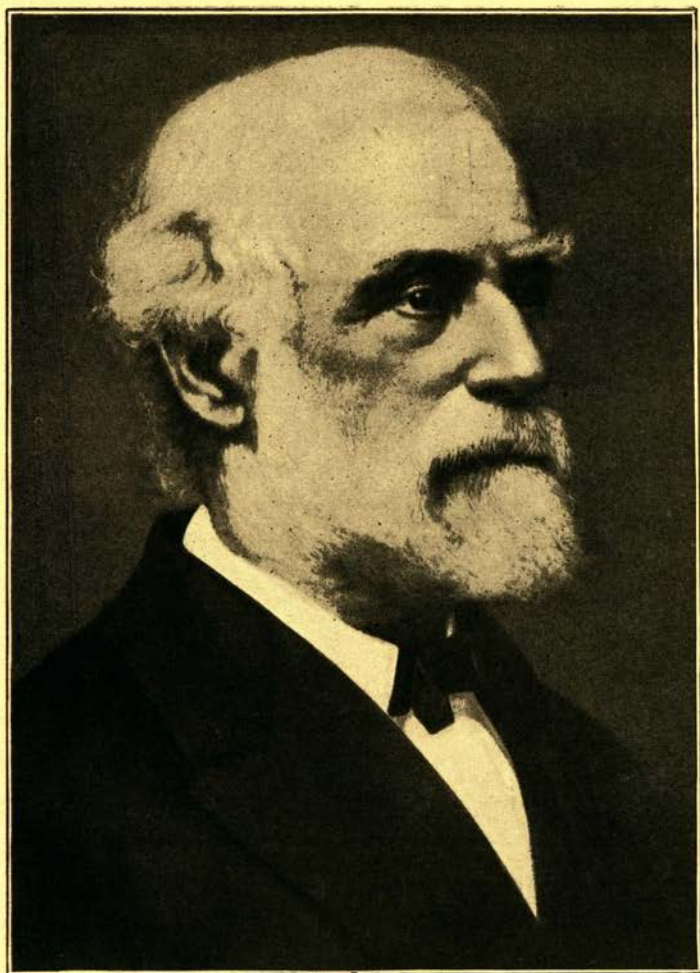
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LEE THE CHRISTIAN HERO

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D.D., LL.D.



BRENTANO'S
WASHINGTON, D. C.



LEE THE CHRISTIAN HERO

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN THE LEE MEMORIAL CHURCH

LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

SUNDAY, JANUARY 20, 1907

ON THE INVITATION OF THE RECTOR AND VESTRY

BY

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WASHINGTON, D. C.



1907

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Lee the Christian Hero

*"By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God."—Hebs. xi, 24-25.**

In this familiar passage the sacred writer calls the roll of some of the heroes of faith, whose achievements had shed lustre on the ancient Church of God from the days of Abel to the coming of Christ. Among them he names Moses, the great law-giver and leader of Israel, who, by his wisdom and his intrepidity, had delivered his people from bondage, and, by his sagacious legislation, had compacted them into a mighty nation.

But in vindication of his claim to a place in the noble army of heroes of faith, he passes by his military exploits, and his consummate leadership, and his peerless achievements as a legislator, and directs attention to the moment in his career when, having come to years of discretion, "he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God."

It was a true instinct that guided the sacred writer in so doing. It shows a just perception of the philosophy of

*No contrast is intended, in the use of this text, between the people of the North and the people of the South. The point of emphasis is the act of renunciation. I used the same text recently in reference to Coleridge Patteson's choice of a life among the Milanese rather than in England.

history thus to justify Moses' title to a place among the heroes of faith, not by his conspicuous achievements done before the eyes of men, but by an act of the soul, seen by no human eye—by that great act of renunciation whereby he turned away from the life of ease and luxury which would have been his as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, as a prince of the royal family, possibly the heir apparent of the throne of Egypt, and threw in his lot with his own people, poor and feeble though they were—"choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God."

My brethren, there has been assigned to me today by the Rector and Vestry of this Church a task which I have not dared to refuse, yet one which, laid upon me at the eleventh hour, I hardly dare to attempt—to give expression to the feeling of this Christian community concerning that illustrious man, the hundredth anniversary of whose birth was so grandly, yet so simply, celebrated in yonder chapel yesterday.

It is a task to which I confess I put my hand with fear and trembling, for who is sufficient to speak worthily of "that great prince and man of men" to whom the great men of the world throughout Christendom have already paid glowing tribute? But, on the other hand, how can I refuse to speak in honor of my commander, whom I loved and revered, whom it was my proud privilege to follow in his great campaigns, and with whom I was permitted to be occasionally associated on most kindly terms, from my boyhood to the day when the light of his noble life went out in this town six and thirty years ago.

Perhaps it is because I knew him, and can speak of him, therefore, from some personal knowledge, that I have been honored by the invitation to stand in this pulpit today. I pray you, then, as you listen to what I say,

"Piece out my imperfection with your thoughts."

It is, I need hardly say, as a hero of faith, that it becomes me to speak of Robert E. Lee in the Church of the Living God, and in connection with the solemn services of Christian worship. He has a place of right in that noble army of the soldiers of Jesus Christ, who have done heroic service for God and for man in their lives. In vindication of that right—if vindication be necessary—I point not to his military exploits, not to his consummate leadership, not to his successful administration of the office of President of your University, nor to any of his great achievements done before the eyes of men, but rather to that spirit of self-renunciation, so often exhibited in his career, whereby he turned away from honor and place and ease, and cast in his lot with his own people. Yes, Lee is one of that noble army of the Christian heroes of the ages, because it can be said of him, as of Moses, "He refused illustrious position, high station, and a life of ease and luxury, choosing rather to suffer affliction with his people."

To two examples of his self-renunciation let me briefly refer. The first was when, in the early spring of 1861, in the parlor of a well-known house on Pennsylvania Avenue, in the City of Washington, Lee was offered the supreme command of the armies of the United States then gathering to suppress "the rebellion." To his natural ambition as a

soldier, such an offer must have presented a great temptation. He loved the Union; he "recognized no necessity" for Secession; he would have "forborne and pleaded to the end for redress of grievances, real or supposed"; he had a deep feeling "of loyalty and duty as an American citizen"; he was strongly attached to the "service to which he had devoted the best years of his life, and all the ability he possessed."

How strong, then, were the motives leading him to accept the brilliant offer! What a career it opened up to him! He knew the weakness of the South—he knew also the power and resources of the North—and, knowing them, the ultimate victory of the North in the impending struggle must have seemed, and did seem, assured. Thus Victory—Fame—Power—Ambition—all lured him on, and urged acceptance. But in vain. No selfish consideration could move him. No ambition could disturb his equilibrium. No promise of glory or promotion could swerve him from his allegiance and his love.

He refused the offer. He renounced all that it promised, choosing rather to suffer affliction with his people.

Deliberately he chose the weaker side—the side he saw must be defeated—the side which must bring him self-denial, and loss, and suffering, and humiliation, and failure. He would suffer with his people. Their lot should be his lot. If they failed, he would fail with them. If they sank to the earth in disaster, he would share their fate.

To another example of our hero's self-renunciation I invite attention for a moment. The impossible had happened

—Lee had surrendered; his glorious battle-flag was furled forever: the war was over.

What now should be the course of this man who had given all his genius, all his marvellous energy, to establish the Confederacy—and given it in vain? Doors of ease and comfort and honor opened to him across the sea. Should he accept them? Why not? Had he not done all that mortal man could do for the Southern people? Had he not sacrificed all he was, and all he possessed on their behalf? Then why not leave the scene of his defeat and losses, and rest in peace and quietness in Old England, where he was admired and revered almost as much as in the South itself? No—a thousand times no! Lee would not forsake his people in their calamity. If he could do no more for them, at least he could do this—he could suffer with them.

And so again a great renunciation is made. This hero of faith turned away from a life of ease, and chose a life of toil. He refused honor and accepted reproach. He turned his back upon a luxurious home offered him beyond the sea, and chose rather to suffer affliction with his people—in their poverty, in their disfranchisement, in all their dire calamities. He would share their sorrows. He would bear their burdens with them. They were his people still, and he would put his neck under the yoke imposed upon them—however grievous it might be.

But if he remained in the South, might he not accept some easy or lucrative post, with only nominal duties—and thus far, at least, consult his ease? You know that offers of such places were made. Let him allow himself,

for example, to be chosen president of a great insurance company, with a princely salary and practically nothing to do. But, again, No! This royal soul turned resolutely away from all such offers. Once more the spirit of self-renunciation triumphed, and Lee chose a life of toil, and care, and self-denial. He accepted the Presidency of Washington College in its day of small things, when it was wrecked and almost ruined by the cruel hoof of war, at a salary of \$1,500, and gave himself to the task of educating the young men of the South in this little mountain town, far from the haunts of men and the stir and clamor of the busy world.

Why? Because he loved his people. Because he saw that the education of her young men was the first and most pressing task of those trying times. Because he believed in "the gospel of work," and would set an example to the Southern people to go to work with all earnestness to rebuild their shattered fortunes.

My brethren, in all this we see the embodiment of the deepest principle of the religion of Jesus Christ. Christ, says the apostle, "died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves." But it may be said of Robert E. Lee that not only in the great crisis of his life was the spirit of renunciation supreme, but that all through his life, from the day when he publicly gave himself to the service of God in old Christ Church, Alexandria, he lived not to himself, but to God and to his fellow man.

I do not think I am mistaken when I say this Christ-like spirit of self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice contributed even

more than his military genius to the greatness of General Lee. It is this which gives so pure a lustre to his fame. The President of the United States has told the world that he was the greatest soldier the Anglo-Saxon race has produced.

I will not presume to say whether that estimate is justified or not; but this I will say, that neither Alexander, nor Caesar, nor Hannibal, nor Napoleon, nor Cromwell, nor Marlborough, nor William of Orange, nor even Gustavus Adolphus, approached the height of moral grandeur that Lee attained, and for the reason that the lives of none of them incarnated to the same extent as his did, the spirit of self-sacrifice. This virtue it was which, superadded to his military genius, and his fortitude, and his intrepidity, and his heroic constancy, made him worthy, as the historian Freeman declared he was, of a place in the temple of fame beside Alfred the Great. Without this, however admired and trusted he might have been by his soldiers, he would not have been loved as he was by every man in that incomparable Army of Northern Virginia.

Nor is this all. Great as General Lee was in the eyes of the world at the close of the war, in spite of the fact that he had failed to establish the Confederacy, I affirm that his greatness shone with far greater lustre when, five years later, his life came to its close.

The world would never have known the full stature of General Lee's greatness if he had succeeded in his Titanic task of establishing the Southern Confederacy. It was in defeat, and trial, and toil, and reproach, that his greatness stood revealed in its true proportions.

Yes, if he was great in action, he was greater in suffering.

If he was majestic as he led his legions to victory on so many bloody fields of battle, he was yet more majestic when he led his defeated and impoverished people in the path of submission to the will of God, and obedience to the laws of the United States, harsh and unjust as all men now acknowledge that they were. He had been their idolized leader in war—he was still their leader in time of peace, or rather in that new conflict now precipitated upon the Southern people, (so much more bitter than flagrant war,) in which patience and forbearance and self-control were the weapons to be employed. As he had given himself without stint to the soldiers in the camp and on the field of carnage, so, now, he gave himself, without reserve, with all his powers, to his people in meeting the hard conditions of their lot, in bearing the bitter yoke of those bitter years of what was falsely called "Reconstruction."

His sublime task now was to "reconcile his people to the consequences of defeat, to inspire them with hope, to lead them to accept frankly and freely the government that had been established by the result of the war, and thus relieve them from military rule." Nobly he addressed himself to the task, and nobly his people responded. In this great emprise Lee did not fail, and the future historian will recognize the services he rendered the South, those last five years of his life, as the greatest he ever rendered.

It was not only that his sublime example taught them patience and fortitude under calamity and injustice, and self-restraint under bitter provocation; but he inspired them with the resolve to put away repining at the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," and go to work with courage

and determination to build up the waste places of the South. Yes, Lee preached the Gospel of Work as well as the Gospel of Reconciliation. His life and example were the real forces that made for reconstruction and the restoration of the Union. And, if today the South is strong and prosperous and rich, holding her place in the Union by as firm a tenure as the North, it is due, more than to any other one influence, to the compelling power of the life and example of Robert E. Lee, from 1865 to 1870, informed as they were always and everywhere, by the Christlike spirit of self-sacrifice.

But my great commander rendered his people, in my judgment, a still greater service even than this. He was a devout Christian, and the light of his faith and his consistent Christian life shone, like a beacon on the mountain top, all over the land.

He had always led a pure and blameless life. The searchlight of investigation reveals no moral crisis in his career, when he turned from a life of sin and self-indulgence to a life of righteousness; no moment when it could be said of him as of the hero of Agincourt:

"Consideration like an angel came,
And whipp'd the offending Adam out of him."

No, from the day when, a boy of eleven, he was his widowed mother's mainstay in the home in Alexandria, on to the hour when in yonder house he fell asleep in Jesus, Robert E. Lee seems to have led a life without spot or stain or flaw. "Tell me," said a Northern writer to a group of Southern men, most of them veterans of the War, "is there nothing in Lee's whole life that partakes of the

weaknesses of other men? Were there no departures from strict virtue and morality in his boyhood or early manhood? Thus far I have been able to find nothing, and I really think his character would be more interesting, because more human, if there were some moral lapses that could be discovered. Perhaps you Southern men, who must have known his life more intimately than we can know it, can tell me at least of some peccadilloes." But none of us could enlighten our visitor on that point. Not that he was not subject to like passions as other men. No doubt "the tide of blood" ran hot and fiery in his veins, but he mastered it as a rider a restive steed, even from his youth. I hasten to say, also, that Lee knew himself too well, and had too just an appreciation of the standard by which man must be judged by his Maker, to build his confidence on the purity of his life, or the strictness of his morality.

In his four years at the Military Academy at West Point he never received a demerit or a reprimand; and so nearly faultless was his career that we may point to him as a model and exemplar to all the ages of man.

But I say Robert Lee saw too clearly into his own heart, and knew too well the strictness of God's Law, to place his hope and his confidence in his own righteousness. No, he felt his weakness, he realized his unworthiness, and he put his trust—his whole trust—for eternal salvation in the merits of his Redeemer. Some time in the year 1863, when told of the prayers that were offered for him at the religious services at the different camps, he said with emotion: "I sincerely thank you for that, and I can only say that I am a poor sinner, trusting in Christ alone, and that I need all the prayers you can offer for me."

May I be permitted to say that this evangelical faith of Robert E. Lee—this meek and lowly trust in Jesus Christ and Him crucified—is the key to his character. He was not a second Marcus Aurelius—the noble stoic, the sad-hearted, royal philosopher. No, he was a Christian—a Christian optimist. If ever a pessimistic view of life might have been excused, it was to a man situated as Lee was at the close of the War. But no, he was always hopeful. When evil or misfortune came he was wont to say: "It will eventuate in some good that we know not of now"; and again, "Some good is always mixed with evil in this world." He believed, as the poet says:

"There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distil it out."

That was his strong anchor in the stormy days of "Reconstruction," when the whole horizon was black with trouble. Yes, to the fortitude of the stoic he added the hopeful faith of the Christian. "We cannot help it," he wrote in a time of affliction, "and we must endure it. We must exert all our patience, and in His own good time God will relieve us and make all things work together for good, if we give Him our love and place in Him our trust."

Throughout his campaigns he ever expressed, in his confidential correspondence with the members of his family, his unfailing trust in the providence of God, and in the hour of victory he gave God all the glory;

"Being free from vainness and self-glorious pride,
Giving full trophy, signal and ostent,
Quite from himself to God."

That correspondence, published by his son and namesake, reveals Lee as a man who lived in the presence of God; who looked to God continually for guidance and strength; whose mind and heart were saturated with faith and trust in God.

We see him a man of prayer in the midst of his campaigns, "My supplications continually ascend for you, my children and my country." Referring to a gallant soldier very dear to him, he utters the aspiration that "God would cover him with His almighty arms and teach him that his only refuge is in Him, the greatness of whose mercy reacheth unto the heavens, and His truth unto the clouds."

In the same correspondence we see also most clearly that this indomitable soldier, "the terrible Lee," was at heart a man of peace. War, of which he was so supreme a master, was to him abhorrent, only possible as a dire necessity in defense of home and fireside. After his great victory over Burnside at Fredericksburg, we find in his letters no trace of exultation over his triumph, but only such utterances as these, "What a cruel thing war is—to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world."

It is characteristic also of this great captain that "the sublimest sight of war" was not the column of dauntless men charging, as Pickett's division charged at Gettysburg, but "the cheerfulness and alacrity of his shivering bare-footed soldiers in pursuit of the enemy under all the trials and privations to which they were exposed."

I do not know in all history a finer example of the broad distinction that exists between the virtues of the stoic and those of the Christian than is afforded by the life and charac-

ter of Lee. Take, for example, two characteristics which were strongly marked in him, especially in his later life, I mean his humility and his forgiveness of injuries. These would not have been considered virtues at all by the stoic, but they hold a prominent place in the category of Christian virtues.

My brethren, what a supreme evidence it was of the grace of God that such a man as General Lee should have achieved the grace of humility.. The man whom General Lord Wolseley describes as the most kingly man he ever saw—the man of whom Stonewall Jackson said, “Lee is a phenomenon; he is the only man I would follow blindfold”—this man was “clothed with humility!”

Yes, the modesty which distinguished him from boyhood ripened in his later years into a genuine Christian humility, as beautiful as it is rare. Under any circumstances this grace is difficult of attainment, and is attained, it is to be feared, by very few. But how much more remarkable its attainment by one possessing such shining qualities of mind and person—of whom we can not but exclaim with Hamlet,

“What a grace was seated on his brow!

* * The front of Jove himself;

An eye, like Mars, to threaten and command;

A station like the herald Mercury,

New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;

A combination and a form indeed

Where every god did seem to set his seal,

To give the world assurance of a man!”

For this man, distinguished and honored through his whole life, in the latter part of his career occupying the very

pinnacle of fame, and—what was far more glorious—reigning still in the hearts of his people when defeat and failure had overtaken him, when his banner was furled, and his sword sheathed forever—for such a man to be clothed with humility would seem a marvel, and that he was so, shows how mightily the grace of God had wrought within him.

Equally wonderful is it to note his meek and quiet endurance of misrepresentation, his refusal to exonerate himself, though justly, at the expense of others.

And then see how this king of men put in practice the precept of Jesus Christ, "I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, . . . and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you." Of this I give a single illustration. Not long after the surrender the government decided that Lee should be indicted for treason in the U. S. Court, and a gentleman in Richmond was requested to communicate the fact to him. In doing so, the gentleman expressed his indignation, whereupon Gen. Lee rose, and, taking his hand, said, with a gracious smile, "We must forgive our enemies," and then added, "I can truly say that not a day has passed since the War began that I have not prayed for them."

And now I wish to invite attention to a fact of deep interest in the study of this great man's character. It is this. Parallel with the unfolding of his greatness as a military leader, as a commander of armies, as a devoted patriot, as a model of all manly virtues, proceeded also the unfolding of his piety. As in the other aspects of his character, so in its religious aspect also, there was "a shining more and more unto the perfect day."

What is the inference—the necessary inference—to be drawn therefrom? It is that the secret of his transcendent greatness is to be found in the fact (to use the language of Jefferson Davis) that “this good citizen, this gallant soldier, this great general, this true patriot, had yet a higher praise than this, or these—he was a true Christian.”

I can frame no satisfactory philosophy of his life except on the principle thus happily enunciated by his illustrious friend.

The last ten years of his life are crowded with instances of sublime self-abnegation, patience, meekness, humility, resignation. Whence, we ask, had this man these things? Whence did he draw the inspiration for such grand moral victories? Came it from earth or from heaven? From man or from God? From philosophy or from religion? There can be but one answer. These traits of character—contempt of glory, meekness under injuries, forgiveness of enemies—are not inculcated by human philosophy, are not recognized in “the code of honor among gentlemen,” are even repudiated as mean and unmanly by the world, while on the other hand they are inculcated by the religion of Jesus Christ (which Lee professed) and by that alone.

Can there then be any other inference save that Christianity supplied the unseen but mighty power which lifted Lee in the sphere of moral greatness so far above most of the great captains of history; that he drew the inspiration for these, his greatest achievements, from heaven, not from earth; that it was divine grace and not nature that made his life so sublime? He has been called by one of his eulogists “the man who has strengthened our faith in

our race by the lofty heights to which his own great nature so easily bore him." Such an estimate must be pronounced radically wrong; it is based on a philosophy which utterly fails to account for the phenomena of his life. From this point of view his character would remain an insoluble enigma. We may say also that it is one which he himself would have utterly repudiated. His whole demeanor and conversation declared that he did not ascribe his virtues to "his own great nature," but to divine grace. "By the grace of God I am what I am," is the language of his life.

A far higher and a truer encomium than the one just quoted, would be to say of him, "General Lee was a man who strengthened the faith of mankind in the religion of Jesus Christ by the sublime heights to which divine grace so easily bore him." This, in my judgment, was the greatest, though not the most conspicuous, service that Lee rendered his people.

I have not attempted this morning to speak of Lee as the great soldier whose fame has filled the world with its echo, but of Lee the member of Christ, the soldier of the cross, the hero of faith.

This is not the place, nor am I the man, to appraise his military genius, or to attempt to estimate his true place among the great captains of history. Much less would it have been suitable for me to discuss here his career in its political aspect, or to pass a political judgment in the sanctuary of God on the great crucial act of his life when he decided to cast in his lot with the Southern States, and to interpose his heroic figure as a shield between the South and her invaders.

Men will continue to differ, peradventure for generations, in their estimate of his career in its public and political aspects, but there is today a truly remarkable unanimity in the sentiments entertained by his countrymen, both North and South, concerning the personal character and the Christian virtues of this heroic man.

His sword was sheathed at Appomatox in defeat—the Confederacy, which he had sustained by his genius and his heroic constancy, fell with him to rise no more—his battle flag was furled that day forever. From that day it was a conquered banner, and he a conquered chieftain.

But on this, the hundredth anniversary of his birth, he who was conquered that day stands forth a conquerer, crowned with laurels as untarnished as ever decked the brow of man. He has conquered the hearts of the American people. Their respect and admiration are his. North and South united yesterday in paying reverent tribute to his memory. Massachusetts, by the voice of one of her noblest and most distinguished sons, who himself fought gallantly for four years against the South, laid a costly garland of immortelles on his tomb. And in the National Capitol, last evening, the President of the United States himself publicly did him honor, while a distinguished Justice of the Supreme Court pronounced an eloquent eulogy on his character.

My friends, this is truly a remarkable victory which has crowned the banner of our dead hero. Compare him in this respect with Oliver Cromwell—that great soldier and iron ruler who, having been long detested and anathematized, was at last given a place and a statue among the greatest of English statesman.

But note that Cromwell's victory over hatred and prejudice was only achieved after the lapse of more than two centuries, while Lee has won his place in the estimation of his countrymen within six and thirty years.

If you ask what it is in the personality of Lee which has conquered the hearts of the men who were his armed foes forty years ago, you will at once be told it is because men have recognized in him from the beginning to the close of his career the unfailing supremacy of duty as he understood it—because, in all the exigencies of his life, in every crisis of conduct, in his public and in his private relations, in the domestic circle as well as in the great stage of public affairs, he was himself the finest illustration of his own oft quoted saying, "Duty is the grandest word in the English language." Yes, through all his varied career, to the very close of his life, no one has ever been able to point to an act of his that was inconsistent with the supreme allegiance to duty. By some his judgment may be impeached; his decision of what was the right course to pursue may be challenged, but there is universal acknowledgment that Lee was ever, and under all circumstances, guided in his decisions and governed in his conduct by what he believed to be his duty.

Or to put the same idea in another way, our great chieftain is victorious today because, like Moses, he refused the path of ease and honor and princely station and chose the hard and difficult path and the lowly lot—chose to suffer affliction with the people he loved.

The sign of the cross was upon his life—especially upon

all that epoch of lowly and inconspicuous labor in this town for the young of the South.

He bore on his heart the burdens and the sorrows of his people, and inspired them, by his example, to patience and constancy, in bearing the heavy cross the cruel times had laid upon their shoulders. He bade them remember in their darkest hour that "human virtue should be equal to human calamity," and this noble sentiment he illustrated in his daily life under the pressure of trials and anxieties that entered like iron into his soul, till at last his mighty heart was broken by the burden, and as he had lived, so he died, for his people.

In conclusion, let me say one thing is yet lacking to make the victory of our great commander complete. Young men of Washington and Lee, young men of the Military Institute, it is for you to complete the triumph of General Lee, on this anniversary celebration, by enlisting under the leadership of his example as soldiers of the cross. With what alacrity the cadets of the V. M. I. marched forth to battle in 1864 at the summons of our dead chieftain, and how gloriously they fought even to the death on the field of Newmarket! Young men, the same imperial voice summons you today—speaking as from his tomb—to take up your cross and follow him as he followed Christ. I will remind you how earnestly General Lee desired that the young men of this university should enter the service of Jesus Christ. Listen to his words on this subject, "I shall be disappointed; I shall fail in the leading object which has brought me here, unless these young men all become Chris-

tians." On another occasion he said, his lips quivering with emotion, and both hands raised:

"Oh, Doctor, if I could only know that all the young men in the college were good Christians I should have nothing more to desire."

Young men, do not disappoint the hope and the prayer of this revered and beloved hero! Complete his victory today by surrendering to the benignant sway of that divine Redeemer whom he loved so well!

Remember, who it is that summons you to the good fight of a Christian. It is he of whom Lord Wolseley said, "I believe he will be regarded not only as the most prominent figure of the Confederacy, but as the greatest American of the Nineteenth Century, whose statue is well worthy to stand beside that of Washington, and whose memory is equally worthy to be enshrined in the hearts of all his countrymen."